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Is teacher happiness contagious? A study of the link between perceptions of language teacher happiness and student attitudes¹

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ABSTRACT

There remains a dearth of research on the effects of student perception of teacher happiness and the ramifications of those perceptions on student feelings and attitudes. Using an online questionnaire, data were collected from 129 adult students of ESL/EFL across the world who were enrolled in formal English classes of intermediate to advanced level proficiency. Participants were asked about their perception of various aspects of their teachers' happiness, and about their own attitudes and motivation to learn English. Statistical analyses revealed that student perception of teacher happiness was significantly (and positively) linked with students' Overall attitude and motivation, as well as students' Attitude towards the teacher. This is interpreted as an illustration of the process of positive emotional contagion between teachers and students. Pedagogical implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords:

teacher emotion, language learning psychology, English, emotional contagion

INTRODUCTION

"Is the teacher happy?" Astonishingly, such a seemingly simple question is rarely given much consideration, let alone asked in an explicit manner. On an intuitive level, it would stand to reason that happiness would be a propitious trait for a language teacher considering the social nature of the classroom and the general observed predilection of students for happier teachers. Still, this assumption has been paid little attention in formal inquiry, as focus on the learner has traditionally been the lodestar of SLA research. Given the reciprocal nature of the student/teacher relationship, there is a growing realization that a consideration of the learner would be incomplete without due focus on the teacher, as teachers themselves are often the defining variable in classroom language learning (De Costa, Li & Rawal, to appear; de Dios Martínez Agudo, 2018; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018; Rawal, De Costa & Li, 2018).

Beyond teacher psychology, the question of student perception of teacher psychology (i.e. what students actually think of their teachers' mental state) remains rather uncharted in SLA literature, despite being a topic that resonates widely because it is so universally recognizable. This paper contends that investigating how students perceive their language teachers in regard to emotion is an essential area of inquiry, adducing the fact that student perceptions are a strong factor in determining learning outcome, perhaps even more influential on learning than teachers' intentions (Fraser, 1998; Shuell, 1996; Shulman, 1986). The importance of student perceptions of teachers is especially relevant to the language classroom, where learning is often facilitated by learners' positive attitudes about their teacher (Gardner, 2010), and how students perceive their teachers has a marked effect on their FL acquisition (Housen, Janssens & Pierrard, 2003).

As the poet Wallace Stevens wrote, "Reality as a thing seen by the mind/Not that which is but that which is apprehended" (Stevens, 1952), and indeed psychologists concur that people tend to respond to their interpretations of circumstances more than objective circumstances themselves (Gilbert, 2006; Kahneman,

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2015). As such, the reality of the classroom can be understood not so much as a given but as a construction and exploring how FL students render and apprehend their classroom and specifically their teacher's emotions can lead to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted and richly complex student/teacher relationship and by extension, the FL learning process itself. The purpose of this study is to explore how adult students of ESL/EFL perceive their teachers' happiness, and how those perceptions affect the students' Overall attitudes and motivation.

While there is a fair amount of research on emotional contagion in the classroom (Dimberg, Thunberg, & Elmehed, 2000; Hagenauer, Hascher & Volet, 2015; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003), research on positive and negative emotions of students and teachers in the foreign language classroom in particular has only recently begun to gain momentum (Dewaele, 2018a; Dewaele, Chen, Padilla & Lake, 2019). Furthermore, extant research has tended heavily towards qualitative methods such as self-reflections and interviews, whereas the current study uses quantitative analysis to explore the emotional contagion of happiness in the foreign language classroom. We hypothesize that happiness is strongly contagious between students and teachers in the EFL/ESL classroom and students who perceive their teachers as happier will report higher levels of positive feelings about the language learning process. We also predict that due to the emotional contagion phenomenon, students will show a strong preference for happier-seeming teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher happiness

Foreign language teachers and their adult students enter the classroom with their respective lives' worth of past experience and unique psychological antecedents. While current research supports the idea that student emotion will be influenced necessarily by context (Mercer, 2016; Ushioda, 2015) of which the teacher is an integral part, in trying to analyze the specifics of the intricate student/teacher relationship, one can easily get lost in a thicket of factors which make research particularly challenging (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). Perhaps due to the seemingly daunting nature of such an exploration, research on teacher psychology has been remarkably underexplored in the field of SLA (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018; Williams, Mercer & Ryan 2015) despite widespread acknowledgement of the teacher's indispensability to the learning process, and an understanding that teacher psychology "is equally if not more important than learner psychology in the language classroom" (Mercer, Oberdorfer & Saleem, 2016, p. 215). What is clear is that students and teachers maintain a place not only in each other's lives but in each other's minds, and the student/teacher relationship is social and emotional by nature (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017; Van Manen, 2017). Spilt, Koomen and Thijs (2011) pointed out that "For students, it is evident that the affective quality of the teacher-student relationship is an important factor in their school engagement, wellbeing, and academic success" (p. 458).

While teacher happiness is important for its own sake (De Costa, Li & Rawal, 2019; Mercer, Oberdorfer & Saleem, 2016; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018; Oxford, to appear), it is also highly significant in relation to the language learner. Studies have proven a causal relationship between teacher happiness and sense of wellbeing, teaching quality and ultimate student performance (Bajorek, Gulliford & Taskila, 2014; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca & Malone, 2006; Day & Gu, 2009; Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke & Baumert, 2008). It is also reasonable to assume that one's behavior is strongly suggestive of one's beliefs and in the context of the language classroom, language teachers' practices are indeed directly linked to their thoughts and beliefs (Borg, 2003, 2006).

For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to establish a working conceptualization of happiness as it is reflected in the research instrument. We consider happiness not as a binary concept and, as such, it is entirely plausible to experience negative emotions while still maintaining a sense of happiness and well-being overall. In fact, the acceptance of negative emotions is widely considered a precursor to happiness. (Ben-Shahar, 2002; Gilbert, 2006; Rogers, 1961; Seligman, 2002). Unlike Freud (1922) who postulated that human happiness is simply the absence of misery, Seligman (2002) views happiness through the more dynamic prism of Positive

Psychology, arguing that human beings can aspire to various types of happiness and that life need not be considered simply a zero-sum game. Human beings are unique in their capability to endure painful, adverse circumstances in the pursuit of a greater happiness (Frankl & Kushner, 2006; Gilbert, 2006) and Frankl and Kushner (2006) explicitly name the search for meaning as a key factor for achieving happiness. Ben-Shahar (2002) combines Freud's pleasure principle with Frankl's theory to form the equation: happiness = pleasure + meaning/purpose. Following in this vein, the current study regards a happy teacher as seeming to enjoy life generally, as well as deriving a sense of meaning or purpose from the endeavor of teaching.

Emotional contagion

Emotional contagion is roughly defined as the process whereby people's emotions are linked or synchronized, either unconsciously or through some type of conscious effort (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1993). Some researchers believe that the more exaggerated and unusual an emotional expression is, the more likely it is to spark contagion (Hess & Blairy, 2001), while others argue to the contrary that the more authentic and natural an emotional expression appears to be, the greater the power of its emotional contagion (Hatfield, Bensman, Thornton, & Rapson, 2014; Saito, Fujimori & Suzuki, 2008). In the context of the foreign language classroom, both exaggerated emotions and more subtle, natural emotional displays, can occur especially on the part of the teacher. In order to look happy, teachers may have to engage in emotional labour (cf. Hochschild, 1983) which "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). Teachers may for example resort to surface acting, where they pretend to show a particular positive emotion (King, 2016). Since the student/teacher relationship is often reciprocal, teachers may also be on the receiving end of emotions (King, 2016). As such, they may also be affected by emotional contagion, in other words, becoming infected with students' emotional states (cf. Dresel & Hall, 2013; Frenzel & Stephens, 2013; Prior, 2016).

The emotion of happiness has a well-known contagion effect (Seligman, 2013) and past research has shown that the emotional contagion process does indeed link teacher and student happiness in the classroom (Dresel & Hall, 2013; Frenzel & Stephens, 2013), though the topic as it relates to the foreign language classroom remains under-researched. In general, there has been found to be a connection between teacher positive emotion and student-centered teaching approaches (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011; Trigwell, 2012), and more positive teacher emotion is connected to effective teaching strategies and creativity (Pekrun et al, 2002; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Dewaele, Gkonou & Mercer, 2018). Frenzel and Stephens (2013) found that math teachers who enjoyed teaching exhibited more lively behavior in the classroom and tended to use more humor, which in turn had a positive effect on student emotion and motivation. In a study of 513 EFL/ESL teachers, Dewaele and Mercer (2018) explored the link between teachers' trait emotional intelligence (TEI) and their attitudes towards lively students, finding that teachers' TEI had a significant effect on their attitude towards their students, and their appreciation of lively students in particular. In a follow-up study on the same database, Dewaele (to appear) found that teachers' TEI was positively linked to their intrinsic motivation and identified regulation.

Positive Psychology in SLA

While traditional psychology has concentrated primarily on pathologies such as anxiety and depression and how to measure and manage them, Seligman first named Positive Psychology as a field of inquiry in 1998, focusing squarely on mental health rather than mental illness and affirming that we can indeed measure wellbeing and actively build it by identifying that which brings meaning to life. SLA research has mirrored that shift in perspective with an increased focus on Positive Psychology and positive emotions in the learning process (MacIntyre, Gregersen & Mercer, 2019) with the understanding that "there is good reason to believe that studying positive emotion in greater detail will produce a novel understanding of the processes involved" (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, p. 240).

As the trend in SLA research has been increasingly influenced by the tenets of Positive Psychology, this in turn has shaped a broader investigation into positive emotions involved in the language learning process

(Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014; Oxford, 2015). In their holistic take on emotion in the language classroom, Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) analyzed Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) of 1740 FL learners from different parts of the world using a new FLE scale which included 21 items combined with an 8-item FLCA scale that was extracted from the FLCAS (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Higher FLE and lower FLCA were linked to multilingualism, a feeling of performing better than one's peers, having achieved higher levels of FL proficiency, being older and studying at tertiary education.

Unsurprisingly, teachers were found to play a crucial role in controlling the emotional thermostat of the classroom. Research has demonstrated that teachers directly influence FLE (Dewaele, Magdalena Franco & Saito, 2019; Dewaele, Witney, Saito & Dewaele, 2018) by facilitating learning, making learners more relaxed and receptive to learn new things (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016), and increasing attention (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). It can be reasonably presumed that teachers who are themselves relaxed, humorous and not overly predictable in the classroom offer their students an open endorsement to risk taking by increasing positive feelings and generating a sense of playfulness (Dewaele, 2015).

The vital role of teachers in relation to classroom positive emotion was further affirmed in a study of 189 British secondary school students of French, German and Spanish by Dewaele et al. (2018), who found evidence that FL teachers have a significant and direct effect on their students' FLE. Attitudes toward the teacher explained a quarter of variance in FLE (a large effect size), the teacher's frequent use of the target language in class explained a further 12% of variance (a medium effect size). Two other independent variables explained smaller amount of variance in FLE: the proportion of time participants could speak in class accounted for 8% of variance (a small-to-medium effect size) and teacher predictability explained a final 6% of variance in FLE (a small effect size) (p. 687). None of these independent variables were linked to FL classroom anxiety (FLCA), which led the authors to conclude that "teachers should seek to light the students' fire by being engaging, by creating interest in the FL and by using it a lot in class rather than worry too much about students feeling cold" (p. 694).

Some research has also focused on the relationship between student emotions and their motivation and attitudes towards the target language (MacIntyre, Dewaele, MacMillan & Li, 2019). The authors used Gardner's (2010) Attitudes and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen 1988). The attitudes toward the learning situation showed strong, consistent correlations with positive emotions. Attitudes toward the teacher, the course, desire to learn English and attitudes toward learning English also correlated significantly with the positive emotions. Similar patterns emerged for the integrative cluster, with significant positive correlations between attitudes toward FL speaking people, interest in FLs and positive emotions.

While the aforementioned research provides strong evidence for teacher attribution in the emotional atmosphere of the classroom, the question of perceived teacher happiness from the vantage point of the student has (to date) not been put forth explicitly as a potential variable in students' own self-reported feelings.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Are students' attitudes and motivation to learn English related to how happy they think their teacher is?
2. Which aspect of perceived teacher happiness has the strongest effect on students' Attitude towards the teacher?

It is hypothesized that both Overall attitude and motivation and students' Attitude towards the teacher will correlate with all aspects of perceived teacher happiness, and the domain of enjoyment/fun in life will be the strongest predictor of variance in both dependent variables.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participation was open to adults of any nationality and L1 background over the age of 18 who were enrolled in a formal ESL/EFL class at the intermediate level or higher at the time of participation. Participants were instructed to answer the questions based on their current course and their current English teacher. A total of 129 adults (40 male, 87 female, 2 unspecified) from all over the world filled out an anonymous online questionnaire. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years old (*Mean* = 23 years, *SD* = 6). They started learning English between the ages of 4 to 46, with an average of 9 years old. They reported 28 different nationalities, with 6 respondents reporting dual nationalities. The largest nationality group represented was Austrian (*n* = 40), followed by French (*n* = 16), Japanese (*n* = 14), UAE (*n* = 9), Syria (*n* = 7), and Belgium (*n* = 7). The highest first language group was German (*n* = 43), followed by Arabic (*n* = 26), French (*n* = 23), and Japanese (*n* = 13). Participants were also asked how many additional languages they spoke with at least enough proficiency to carry on a basic conversation. There were 32 bilinguals, 57 trilinguals, 33 quadrilinguals, 4 pentalinguals and 4 sextalinguals.

Instrument

Data were collected in an online questionnaire using the snowball method, which is a form of non-probability sampling (Ness Evans & Rooney, 2013). The call for participation was sent to primary contacts, then to secondary and tertiary contacts via email and social media. The survey was comprised of three sections.

The first section consisted of items to collect basic demographic and personal data, including questions about self-described English proficiency, performance in English class, amount of time spent exposed to English outside of the classroom, and self-described performance in English class as compared to peers.

The second part of the questionnaire comprised an adapted version of the AMTB (Gardner, 1985). The dependent variables are: the composite variable of student Overall attitude and motivation, and its subcategory of Attitude towards the teacher, based on the AMTB section, 'attitudes towards the learning situation.' This subcategory included items such as: 'I look forward to going to class because my teacher is so good,' and 'My English teacher is a great source of inspiration to me.' Responses were measured on 5-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, (45 items in total, *Mean* = 3.92, *SD* = .52, Cronbach's alpha = .920). Negatively worded items were reverse coded.

The AMTB was chosen because it is based on the socio-educational model, which measures three main components: attitude towards the learning situation, integrativeness, and motivation (Gardner, 2005; MacIntyre, Dewaele, Macmillan & Li, 2019), considering various dimensions of language learning, including the psychological, social, and political (Gardner, 2010). This construct seemed most appropriate because the current paper has a focus on the relationship between the student and the teacher, including social and emotional perceptions, and the AMTB considers the learning of a second or foreign language as a social process, not merely an educational one (Gardner, 1985). The AMTB was also chosen because of its high rate of reliability and flexibility, which allows the form of the test to be easily changed depending on the researcher's intended purpose (Gardner, 1985).

AMTB items were selected with several criteria in mind. First, since the participants were all adults, the section on students' parents which appears in the original was omitted. For the same reason, items across all categories that dealt with homework and assignments were also omitted. Additionally, the section from the original on FL anxiety was not included in this instrument because it was not pertinent to the research questions at hand.

The third section of the survey assessed how happy students perceived their teacher to be, using an adapted form of the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin & Crossland, 1989), a construct meant to measure overall personal happiness (16 items total, *Mean* = 5.33, *SD* = 1.06, Cronbach's alpha = .90). This construct was chosen because of its adaptability and consistently high rate of reliability across cultures (Hills &

Argyle, 2002). Negatively worded items were reverse coded. Items were measured on 7-point Likert scales, from completely disagree to completely agree. The three independent variables are the three domains of happiness as determined by the original construct. The domain of teacher vigor/good health includes statements such as ‘My teacher probably thinks the world is a good place,’ and ‘My teacher is very happy.’ The domain of teacher satisfaction with personal achievements includes statements such as: ‘In general, my teacher seems pleased with themselves,’ and ‘My teacher probably feels that teaching is rewarding.’ Finally, the domain of teacher enjoyment/fun in life includes statements such as: ‘My teacher laughs a lot,’ and ‘My teacher has a cheerful effect on students.’

A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed no normal distribution for the two dependent variables (all $p < .0001$) however Q-Q plots showed a near normal distribution for Overall attitude and motivation with some outliers towards the positive and negative ends (Figure 1), and nearly normal distribution for students’ Attitude towards the teacher (Figure 2), so the more powerful parametric testing was chosen.

Figure 1. Normal Q-Q plot of overall attitude and motivation

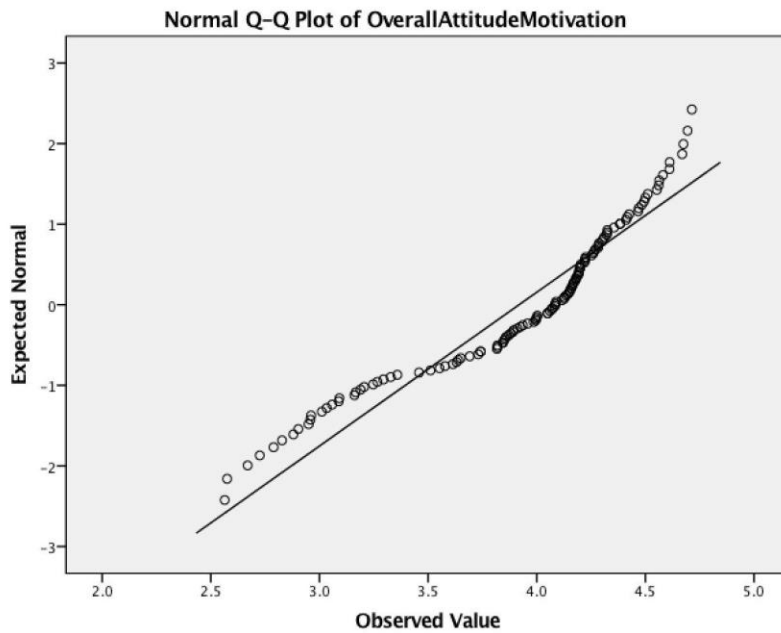
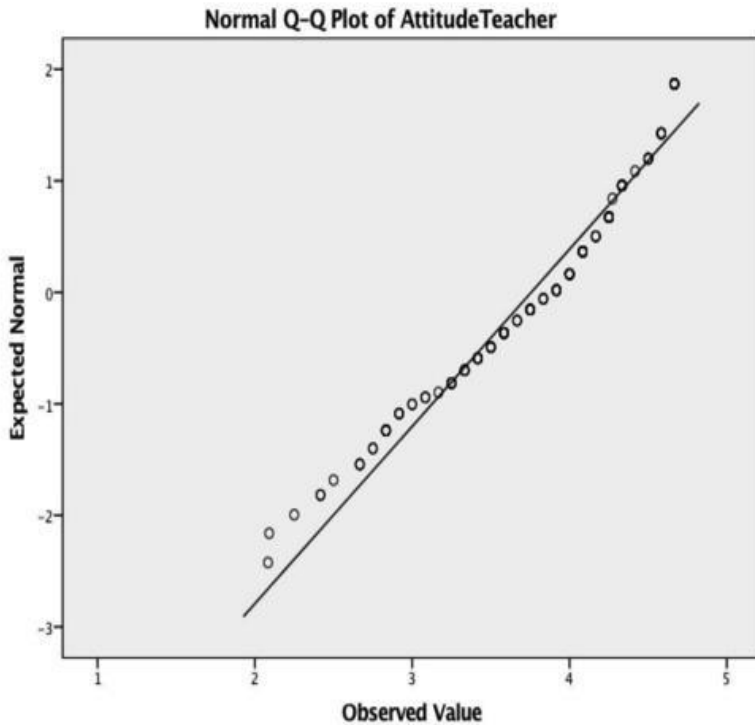


Figure 2. Normal Q-Q plot of attitude towards the teacher



The research design received ethical approval from the authors’ institution. Participants indicated their consent by ticking a box at the start of the questionnaire.

RESULTS

A Pearson correlation analysis (Table 1) showed that all three independent variables were significantly linked with students’ Overall attitude and motivation.

Table 1. Pearson correlation analysis between independent variables and students’ Overall attitude and motivation

	Teacher satisfaction with personal achievements	Teacher vigor/good health	Teacher enjoyment/fun in life
Overall attitude and motivation	.401**	.390**	.353**

* p < .001

Students who felt their teachers were satisfied with their own life achievements, including their chosen profession of teaching, reported higher levels of attitude and motivation towards learning English. As expected, there is a positive relationship between how students feel about their teacher and how they feel about the subject matter.

In order to find out how much unique variance each independent variable explains, they were included in a multiple regression analysis (see table 2). This allows the removal of redundancy from the independent variables and allows the identification of the best predictors compared to the zero-order correlations. The enter method was used. Values for the variance inflation factor (VIF), which quantifies the severity of multicollinearity, hover between 2.2 and 4.2, which is below the recommended cut-off point of 5 (Kutner et al., 2004). The Durbin Watson test for autocorrelation in the residuals was 1.39, which suggests there is no

autocorrelation in the sample. A significant regression equation was found for students’ overall attitude and motivation ($F(3, 125) = 9.35, p < .0001$) explaining 16% of the variance. According to Plonsky and Oswald (2014, p. 889) this is a medium effect size. It suggests that perceived teacher satisfaction with personal achievement subsumes the other two variables. A single significant predictor emerged: teacher satisfaction with personal achievements (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Scatter plot for students’ Overall attitude and motivation and teacher satisfaction with personal achievements

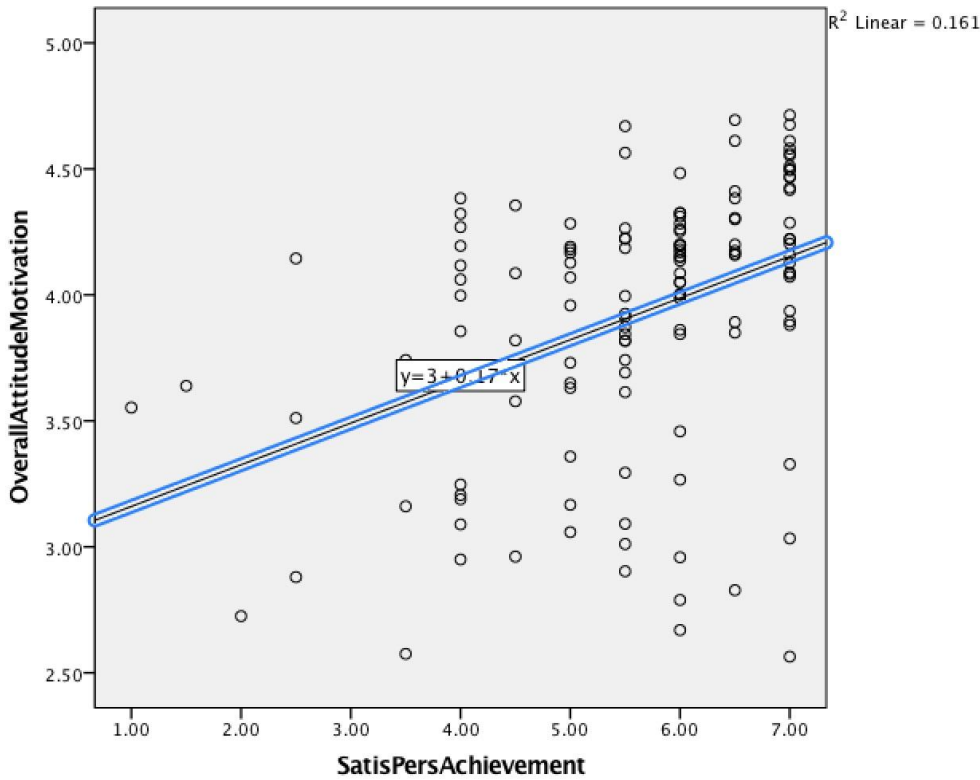


Table 2. Multiple regression analysis for overall attitude and motivation, sorted by beta value

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Teacher satisfaction with personal achievement	.11	.05	.26	2.1	.034
Teacher vigor/good health	.12	.08	.24	1.4	.151
Teacher enjoyment/fun in life	-.02	.07	-.04	-.23	.815

A series of Pearson correlation analyses show that all three domains of perceived teacher happiness correlate significantly with students’ attitude towards the teacher.

Table 3. Pearson correlation analysis between independent variables and students’ Attitude towards the teacher

Table 2. Pearson correlation analysis between independent variables and students’ Attitude towards the teacher

	Teacher satisfaction with personal achievements	Teacher vigor/good health	Teacher enjoyment/fun in life
Attitude towards the teacher	.503**	.498**	.496**

* p < .001

A multiple regression analysis (enter method) was calculated to predict students’ attitude towards the teacher based on perceived teacher’s satisfaction with personal achievements, vigor/good health and enjoyment/fun in life. Values for the variance inflation factor (VIF), which quantifies the severity of multicollinearity, hover between 2.2 and 4.3, which is below the recommended cut-off point of 5 (Kutner et al., 2004). The Durbin Watson test for autocorrelation in the residuals was 1.88, which suggests there is no autocorrelation in the sample. A significant regression equation was found ($F(3, 125) = 17.63, p < .0001$), with an adjusted R^2 of .25, a strong effect size (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). The only significant predictor is - once again - teacher satisfaction with personal achievements. This suggests that students feel most favorably about teachers who they think are satisfied with life and find a sense of meaning in their profession (see table 4 and figure 4).

Figure 4. Scatter plot for attitude towards teacher and teacher satisfaction with personal achievements

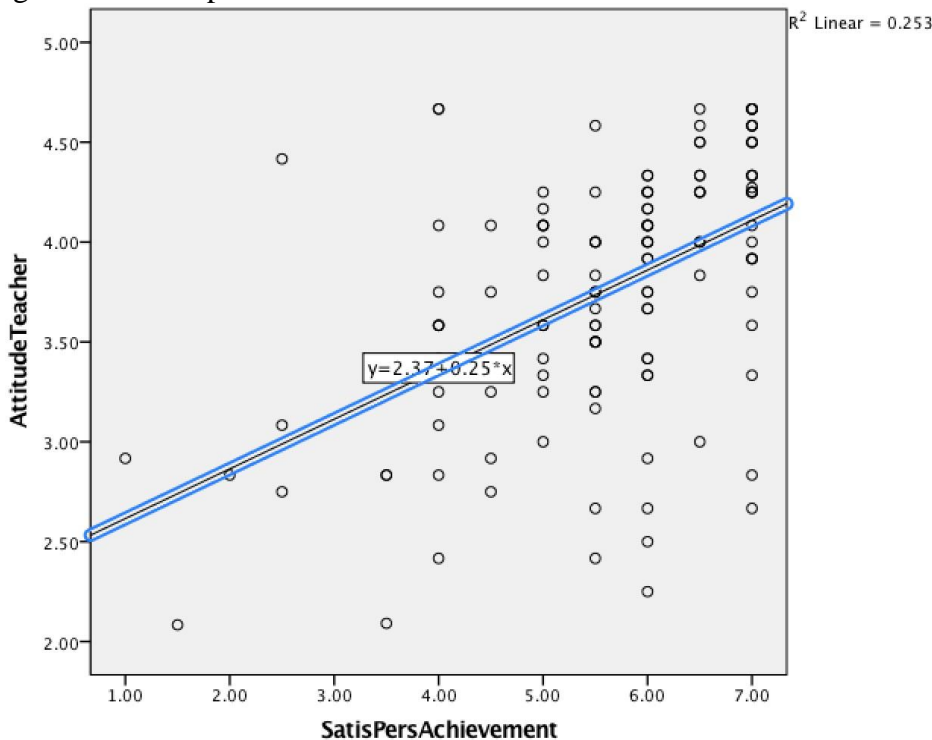


Table 4. Multiple regression analysis for attitude towards the teacher, sorted by beta value

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Teacher satisfaction with personal achievement	.13	.06	.27	2.39	.019
Teacher vigor/good health	.12	.09	.18	1.14	.256
Teacher enjoyment/fun in life	.08	.08	.15	.99	.326

DISCUSSION

The first research question explored the relationship between the perception of teacher happiness and the Overall attitudes and motivation of students. There proved to be a positive connection, which itself is unsurprising, however what emerged unexpectedly is that the happiness domain of teacher satisfaction with personal achievements predicted a medium amount of variance in students' Overall attitudes and motivation. This would seem to suggest that students who think their teachers are satisfied with various aspects of their own lives, including their decisions to become teachers as measured in the construct, feel more positively towards learning English. The happiness domain of enjoyment/fun in life was hypothesized to be the strongest predictor. It turned not to predict any unique variance. When considering the question of whether or not teacher happiness is contagious, we can surmise that it is indeed (Dresel & Hall, 2013; Frenzel & Stephens, 2013), though what might be contagious encompasses more than simply a sense of fun, but a sense of the teacher's personal and professional satisfaction - which is probably linked to a high level of engagement - that boosts students' attitudes towards English and their motivation to master the language, The teacher's happiness can probably be inferred by a range of different cues, such as smiling, joking and an ability to regulate the social and emotional atmosphere in the classroom (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Gkonou & Mercer, 2017).

The second question looked at Attitude towards the teacher, finding that students who perceived their teachers to be happy had a more positive attitude towards them, which confirms the intuitive assumption that students prefer happier teachers. These results dovetail with previous research findings on the crucial role of the teacher in Foreign Language Enjoyment (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Dewaele et al., 2019) and the importance of the student teacher relationship in general (Hattie, 2009; Hughes et al., 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010). The happiness domain of teacher satisfaction with personal achievements emerged again as a significant positive predictor, showing an even larger effect size. This result suggests that students might have a more favorable attitude towards teachers who project an air of personal and professional fulfillment, emotional intelligence (Dewaele et al., 2018), motivation (Dewaele, to appear) and positive attitudes towards the students (Dewaele & Mercer, 2018).

Students were asked directly what they thought about their teachers' happiness ("My teacher is very happy"), as well as their teachers' happiness as perceived in real time ("My teacher experiences joy and elation in the classroom"), and a more abstract impression of overall sense of happiness and life goals ("My teacher probably feels that teaching is rewarding"). We presume that teachers who seem more satisfied with their personal achievements express this satisfaction (whether knowingly or unknowingly) through their behavior, which positively affects the atmosphere of the classroom and by extension, boosts students' positive feelings. As more satisfied teachers might enjoy teaching more, that enjoyment might rub off on students, an assumption that aligns with Dewaele et al.'s (2018, 2019) finding that enjoyment in the classroom is generated by teachers and shared between teachers and students.

Also, it is likely that teachers who find teaching rewarding show more enthusiasm in the classroom, which is a key component of enjoyment (Dörnyei, 2001). Our findings thus confirm the assertion by Hofstadler, Talbot, Mercer and Lämmerer (to appear) that "teachers teach better when they are happy,

motivated and enjoying their work. Their well-being is a core contributory factor to the effectiveness of their teaching and ultimately the achievement of their learners”.

LIMITATIONS

Our participants were adults from around the world enrolled in a formal intermediate to advanced level ESL/EFL class at the time of participation. We can therefore not claim that our findings extend to younger learners at the start of their foreign language learning journey (including other languages but English). We are also aware of the inevitable self-selection bias in participation in online questionnaires (Dewaele, 2018b), meaning that unhappy, unmotivated students would be less likely to participate. We do feel, however, that we had sufficient variation in the sample to perform meaningful analyses.

A final limitation of this study is that it deals with student perceptions of teachers and does not take into consideration how the teachers themselves self-report their levels of happiness. Gathering such data would have been nearly impossible in a cross-sectional study such as this one and more importantly, such information would not have helped answer our research questions. Still, future research might attempt to investigate whether or not student perceptions of teachers correspond to teacher self-reported reality.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In light of the strong link between the emotions of students and teachers, an argument can be made that teachers could and should actively strive to make teaching a positive experience both for their own sake and for their students. Realistically, we understand that this is sometimes much easier said than done, as uncontrollable factors often come into play, such as institutional culture, personal issues or professional pressure. However, as Falout and Murphey (2018) make the case, teachers should be encouraged to actively “job craft” and find a sense of meaning in their work, regardless of whether or not they feel that teaching is their “true calling.” Falout and Murphey assert that even if language teachers do not easily feel a sense of fulfillment from teaching, they can make teaching a positive experience by actively and consciously cultivating their own personal meaning in the endeavor of teaching and “through...social dynamics, meaning influences the psychological well-being of language learners and teachers at school and in their out-of-school lives” (Falout & Murphey, 2018, p. 215).

The results of our study support the assertion that happy teachers help language students thrive (Mercer, Oberdorfer & Saleem, 2016). Considering our results, it might be wise for teachers to make a conscious effort to try and derive a sense of meaning from their work, which could have a contagious effect on students, thereby infusing students’ quest to learn the target language with meaning. One potential strategy in the form of cognitive reappraisal is what Gregersen, MacIntyre and MacMillan (to appear) refer to as ‘finding silver linings.’ Clearly however, the burden should not fall squarely on teachers themselves as contextual factors invariably come into play. Employers and educational institutions need to recognize and validate teacher concerns, offering ongoing personal and professional support as needed. As De Costa et al. (2019) suggest, programs for training English language teachers should also include affective training aspects in order to better prepare teachers to handle the emotional challenges associated with the profession.

While some teachers may have a natural propensity towards happiness, teachers who are not blessed with this advantage need extra effort and training to build grit and resilience so that emotional labor does not wear them down. In their conclusion, King, Dewaele and Gkonou (to appear) jokingly argue that teachers would benefit in acquiring some martial arts skills, namely the physical and mental resilience and the control of body and mind. Teachers who are confident in their ability to face challenges, capable of emotional regulation, humble about skills and achievements, proud about their profession, are more likely to be happy teachers. One final point is that teachers’ happiness and well-being does not come only from positive emotions. As Oxford (to appear) points out, negative emotions can be catalysts for growth and then let go.

CONCLUSION

This study explored emotional contagion in the classroom by looking at how student perceptions of ESL/EFL teacher happiness are linked to students' attitudes and emotions. The findings suggest that student perception of teacher happiness is positively linked with students' Overall attitude and motivation, as well as students' Attitude towards the teacher. More specifically, how happy students think their teacher is and how they render their teacher's mental state shapes their overall impression of their teacher, and by extension also influences their feelings.

Exploring student perceptions of language teachers is still relatively novel, however considering the emotional link between teachers and students and the strong influence that the student/teacher relationship exerts on the learning process, examining how students perceive their teachers is a crucial area of inquiry that deserves to be further developed. Language teacher happiness is not only important in its own right, but fundamental to the learning process, and as such should be explored further and with greater depth and scope, as Mercer and Kostoulas (2018) have emphatically made the case. We feel that the current study represents a first step in that direction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

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